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Funeral care for pets grows into franchises

Carmel-based Pet Angel hopes to have 500 sites over 7 years

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At a facility tucked into a Carmel shopping center, pet owners find urns to store their deceased animals' ashes and a chapel to say their last goodbyes. They're offered hugs and condolences and the chance to memorialize their pets by screen-printing their pictures onto plates or throws.

This place emerged from Coleen Ellis' vision of providing the high-quality after-care offered to humans for the furry creatures that, in many households, are like members of the family.

She opened Pet Angel Memorial Center in 2004, and the concept took off so successfully that it's on its way to being franchised nationwide, with hopes of expanding to 500 locations over the next seven years.

With the help of a few private-equity investors, Ellis closed on a location in Wichita, Kan., last week and a Tampa, Fla., site Friday.

Early next year, she plans to expand locally with a Greenwood location and other stores throughout the Indianapolis area, although no firm plans have been set. The corporate headquarters and training center will be in Carmel.

Ellis said that as the company grows, so will the concept of treating pet death with dignity.

"I think 10 or 15 years from now, when your pet dies, you'll call the pet funeral director," said Ellis, who previously worked in human funeral services. "We'll be the ones not only leading the charge, but setting the standard for your pet funeral home."

She said she was inspired to open the business by the death of her dog, Mico.

Until Ellis opened her operation, pet owners seeking that service had nowhere to go, according to the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association. About a dozen pet funeral homes nationwide have followed suit.

When Pet Angel opened its doors, it received about a call a week from pet owners. Now it has seen more than 3,000 clients and serves about 90 a month.

Almost all of the pet owners opt for cremations, which range from \$230 to \$430, with additional fees for heavier animals, and come with keepsakes such as a mold of the pet's paw print and snippets of its fur. The business serves mainly cats and dogs but has seen rats, birds, goldfish, even chinchillas.

Some owners choose to bury their animals, and about 15 have had full-blown funerals.

"The whole process is about closure," said Ellis. "It's being able to say goodbye in a comfortable setting one more time."

Massachusetts-based entrepreneur Glenn Hanson decided to invest in Pet Angel about a year ago. He had been thinking of starting his own pet after-care franchise, but when he was introduced to Ellis' business model, he found it perfect for the niche.

"It's not hard to figure out that the pet industry is growing and the animals eventually do die," said Hanson, who owns a cocker spaniel-poodle mix named Oliver. "People like me will

suffer heavily when the time comes for their loss. Anybody who satisfies the need of comforting the grieving parent will be successful."

Pets reside in 71 million American homes, and owners spent an estimated \$41 billion on them this year, according to a survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. Spending on specialty products and services is on the rise, the report notes.

When asked if some have criticized Pet Angel's services as excessive, Ellis said it's not anyone's place to determine what's appropriate for another person's pet, "just like we shouldn't judge if the casket that a family bought is too extravagant or not extravagant enough."

Carl Davis, who lost his 16-year-old Pekingese-poodle mix, Baby, to congestive heart failure in September, said without Pet Angel, handling the loss would have been a "horrible, cold experience."

"I would have a cardboard box with a plastic bag with ashes," said Davis, a registered nurse. "(Pet after-care) is sort of a lost piece. It's such a needed thing."

That's why, Ellis said, her business will be successful.

"People just want to know they're not crazy for loving a pet. That's one of the biggest things we get: 'Thank you for validating my feelings.' "